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ABSTRACT

Written in response to an article critical of Reading Recovery (published in the December/January 1996/1997 issue of "The Reading Teacher"), this paper describes what the 5 authors have learned and are learning about Reading Recovery. An introductory section discusses Reading Recovery, noting that it is an individual tutoring program for young children who are having difficulty learning to read and write after their first year of school. Sections of the paper describe how: (1) the authors learned to teach and to think differently about teaching and learning; (2) demonstration teaching behind a one-way glass offered a powerful setting for their learning; (3) they discovered their strengths as they constructed their own understandings of the children they taught; (4) they became committed to giving the child control of the learning process; (5) they learned to be efficient as well as effective--to keep a lively pace and make the most of that 30 minutes of time; (6) they learned the reciprocal value of writing and reading; (7) like other scientists, they developed skills in keeping and analyzing records of students' behaviors; (8) their colleagues contributed to their learning in deep and significant ways; (9) Reading Recovery teacher leaders offered special help, support, and challenge as the teachers examined their teaching; (10) they are experienced Reading Recovery teachers, but they continue to learn more every year; and (11) Reading Recovery is hard work, but they have been rewarded by seeing their students' rapid progress. (RS)

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# Teaching and Learning: Our Experience in Reading Recovery

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# Teaching and Learning: Our Experience in Reading Recovery

Reading Recovery Teachers: **Ann Browne**, Temple, Texas; **Maryellen Fitts**, Lincolndale, New York; **Bennetta McLaughlin**, Pittsburg, California; **Mary Jane McNamara**, Lincolndale, New York; **Judy Williams**, Rio Linda, California

*This is the original response to an article by Bonnie Barnes published in The Reading Teacher (December/January, 1996/1997). Barnes' article is critical of Reading Recovery and its training program. When the five authors submitted their reply, they were directed by RT editors to revise the article so that its content reflected only those specific points raised in the Barnes article; their revised article also appears in the December/January 1996/1997 issue of RT. The original article as submitted to RT by the authors is printed here for use by teachers who wish access to a more complete version of Browne, et. al.*

*Please note: passages that are shared in common with the RT article by Browne, et. al. (which is copyrighted) are indicated by the use of italics.*

Reading Recovery has had a powerful impact on our knowledge, our teaching, and our sense as educators. *We are five Reading Recovery teachers from three different states; we teach in districts and schools that vary widely. We bring different backgrounds and personal styles to our Reading Recovery teaching. Two of us have just finished the first year of Reading Recovery teaching; three others are more experienced in the program. Our years of teaching range from 15 to 25.*† We are individuals, but we share a common vision and a knowledge base from which we construct our teaching.

Reading Recovery® (Clay, 1993b) is an individual tutoring program for young children who are having difficulty learning to read and write after their first year school. *As Reading Recovery teachers, we tutor at least four children per day* and that makes up one-half of our teaching load. For the other one-half of the day, *some of us teach primary classrooms and others teach Title 1 groups*. In our tutoring, we use a flexible framework of actions to involve children in reading and writing. We have a repertoire of procedures from which we select, but our real job is to observe children closely and tailor our teaching moves to help each discover and use effective literacy strategies. We call this process, "following the child," and the Reading Recovery professional development course is designed to assist us in developing this kind of teaching skill.

All of us entered Reading Recovery to help children learn to read and write, and we have experienced success in doing that; we have also learned ourselves. It has not been easy; teaching never is, especially when working with children who are confused or discouraged. Like all teachers, we struggle to meet the educational challenges of today's world. But we have learned and are learning; Reading Recovery has helped in the process. Here, we describe how this happened, reflecting on our learning and common ground, but also speaking with our individual voices.

**We learned to teach and to think differently about teaching and learning.** As we began our work in Reading Recovery, all of us participated in assessment training for several days and then began a weekly seminar that went on all year. The Reading Recovery training course is complex. It includes weekly sessions during which we teacher participants take turns teaching behind a one-way glass screen. The teacher leader guides us with challenging questions and we talk aloud, describing what we see and what we think it means. Our discussion is often challenging, sometimes serious and sometimes fun. Sometimes, one person's observations will be the spark that ignites a productive chain of talk that gives everyone new insights. It is as is we are creating understandings together (see Lyons, Pinnell, & DeFord, 1993). We discuss the lessons afterwards in a more reflective way that allows us to consult references, construct hypotheses, and analyze the child's and teacher's behavior.

The training program also includes individual visits from the teacher leader, self analysis, analysis of our recorded observations of student behavior, and reading and considering theory. Ann describes the training year as a "voyage" that provides both a personal and professional discovery into the process of learning to read. She says, "Being part of the year-long class—a class with dedicated colleagues—has produced for me a renewed sense of the meaning of teaching 'strategically' and planning for effective teaching." Maryellen sees it as an exploration of the "whys" of teaching. She says, "As demanding as the training was, we were always reminded of and encouraged to discuss the philosophical reasons underlying everything we were learning and doing."

*As a past staff developer, Judy recognizes all the elements of effective training: demonstration, practice, immediate application with students and a coach for feedback and support.*

**It was during the first week of training that I began to understand that something was different. This was not going to be the 'lecture-take notes' experience I knew from post-graduate work. Nor was it going to be the isolated learning experience we all remember from undergraduate days. What I began to see that first week was the powerful training model that surrounds Reading Recovery.** ***When our weekly classes started in mid-September, I had a choking list of questions. I was eager to note all of my teacher leader's answers. That didn't happen. Instead, she redirected my questions back at me: "What did you observe your student doing? "How did your student respond to _____? "What does the guidebook say about that?" This wasn't what I wanted or expected. I wanted a recipe. I wanted someone to tell me what to do. When I shared my frustration with a colleague, I realized during that conversation that I had to take responsibility for what I knew and didn't know. It was a turning point.. With my teacher leader's guidance, I began involving myself in an on-going process of inquiry: What is the reading process? How can my records be valuable? What role does writing have in***

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† Throughout this article, italics indicate portions of text from: Brown, A., & others. (Dec. 1996/Jan. 1997). Teaching and learning in Reading Recovery: Response to, "But teacher you went right on: A perspective on Reading Recovery," Bonnie L. Barnes, The Reading Teacher, 50(4), 294-300. Permission granted to reprint.

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***learning to read? I read the guidebook and reread the guidebook. I recorded my lessons on video and audio tape and examined and analyzed them. I also observed an experienced Reading Recovery teacher at a nearby school. By January, I knew how to learn more about my teaching, and the process continues.***

*The design and format of the Reading Recovery training course provide a framework for significant, positive changes to take place for each participant. Ann describes it as a diagnostic learning atmosphere, an environment safe for taking risks and sharing strengths as well as weaknesses in teaching practices:*

**As a training class, we realized that we are all learners, with a continuum of professional and personal growth, developing and enjoying the same atmosphere we hope to provide for our students. The training sessions centered around the philosophy that new growth and student development are celebrated. As a result, teachers in training have experienced a positive framework for learning and have new ways to teach reading to our students.**

Our training began with observation, and it became a constant theme throughout the year. We learned to become "noticing" teachers. We observed children, formed hypotheses, and then adjusted our instructional interactions to the individual child's strengths and needs. Ann states,

**The instructional setting of individualized teaching has shown me how to intensify instruction for all of my students. Working one-on-one is a vivid reminder of the power of strategic teaching. The decisions I make for the student determine the basis of analysis for each lesson. I was able to improve the level of planning, prompting, and analysis as I observed the effect my teaching had at the individual level.**

Maryellen found it valuable to learn how to give and evaluate the Observation Survey (Clay, 1993a), how to use this information in teaching, how to focus on strengths rather than deficits, how to take, analyze and use running records, how the procedures structure the lesson, and how appropriate teacher prompts help the child solve independently. Mary Jane says that she found herself "living" Brian Cambourne's (1988) conditions of learning: "We were immersed in the teaching process, always mindful that we were active learners who could draw from prior knowledge while learning how to observe children's strengths in new and exciting ways."

We soon learned to use the lesson format as a backdrop for our teaching. This routine framework provided organization for learning. We knew that we would move from reading to writing and back to reading, varying texts for each child. Routines, so important in home storybook reading, were established early in the lessons and helped us and our students feel at ease. The children and teachers in Reading Recovery are organized to learn, but their focus is not on the activity itself: it is on the meaning of the stories and on composing and writing. Of course, the teacher adds the layer of close observation and provides scaffolding for the child's efforts on a moment to moment basis. Maryellen comments:

***The 30-minute lesson is highly structured and on the surface may seem restrictive. However, over the last three years, I have also found great freedom--in my choice of books, my choice of teaching points for the lesson, my choice of instructional prompts. Every aspect of the lesson allows me to make teaching decisions that facilitate the child's progress.***

**Demonstration teaching behind a one-way glass offered a powerful setting for our learning.** *Adjusting teaching on a moment-by-moment basis was a real challenge for all of us. Of course, we reflected and analyzed afterwards, and that was valuable; but the real test of teaching is making those powerful teaching moves.* Reading Recovery teachers select, "... the clearest, easiest, most memorable examples with which to establish a new response, skill, principle or procedure" (Clay, 1993b, p.8). We try not to "clutter up" the lesson with too much teacher talk; instead we make our reading and writing interactions as much like conversation as we can. Watching through a glass while our peers teach their students and simultaneously talking among ourselves, helped us develop as noticing teachers.

*Mary Jane believes that these sessions helped to create a positive environment which encouraged risk-taking on the part of teachers. She says, "I'm not suggesting that I didn't get nervous behind the glass but I welcomed the opportunity to get feedback from my peers. Their comments and questions helped me rethink my teaching and focus on the student's strengths* to help facilitate acceleration." Maryellen says that at first the sessions were daunting but they became a tremendous opportunity to evaluate her teaching and to receive valued suggestions in terms of the child she was working with. The teacher leader's questions created a powerful learning experience for all: "As a group, we became colleagues in the true sense of the word--opinions sought, praise given, insights and suggestions offered. I guess the word that best describes the process is trust."

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# Teaching and Learning: ...

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Judy reveals that her early observations focused on procedures. "I was obsessed with putting the thirty minute lesson together in the right order. Once I could do that, I started attending to teaching reading: prompting for strategies, selecting the powerful teaching point, evaluating what the student was doing on the run."

*Ann remembers that her colleagues learned to trust each other and collaborate to solve problems and issues with individual students as the year progressed. She states:*

> ***We became more open and welcome to suggestions from the teacher leader and each other with each passing week. Because each one of us was a risk-taker, we became equals, able to trust and ask questions that would help our students* achieve acceleration. With the guidance of our teacher leader, we became open and relished opportunities to share both the strengths and needs of students. I appreciate this unique peer perspective on teaching; it is a component not addressed in many districts.**

*In Judy's class, the "behind-the-glass" sessions were humorously referred to as "our fate." But, she says that, in reality, "They became our gift. Each time a colleague taught behind the one-way mirror, I had the opportunity to practice observing a child and ask myself important questions: What does this child know? What are the strategies she is using? What does she need to learn? This practice made it easier for me to 'follow the child' in my own lessons. During this same kind of session, I had the opportunity to observe my peers. When it was my turn to go "behind the glass," I trusted the teacher leader and my classmates to support my approximations and keep it positive. I was always rewarded with helpful observations of my student and productive feedback about my teaching.*

**We discovered our strengths as we constructed our own understandings of the children we taught.** Did we discard the rich knowledge base we had developed as experienced teachers? Certainly not. But, as learners do when they enter new territory, we were open to challenges and ideas. We gradually adjusted our existing knowledge base as we learned more. We expanded our teaching possibilities. Most of us did relinquish some particular techniques, but it is more appropriate to say that we rearranged our thinking, becoming more aware of the child's responses and of the importance of our decision-making.

*When we talk with our colleagues at conferences and institutes, we find that change is a shared feature of Reading Recovery training. An Australian study, in fact,* is called Changing Lives (Power & Sawkins, 1991), and this title refers not only to the children but to the teachers involved. Our Australian colleagues talk about the anxiety they experienced when they participated in demonstration teaching. They mention stress and hard work; we have experienced those. *But they also commented on how much they had learned and how their lives had changed as a result. Something worth learning does not always come easy. After all, we are trying to do something very difficult*—help initially struggling children make accelerated progress and become effective writers and readers. Maryellen says:

> ***I would never teach children to read in the same way again! I had been to courses and workshops on "whole language" and had adopted bits and pieces, but I had never been able to really integrate what I was learning with the methods I had used for many years. I learned that I didn't have to give up everything that I had been doing, but I needed to change my emphasis* from the "parts" to the "whole" and from initial word accuracy to meaning and fluency.**

**We became committed to giving the child control of the learning process.** Clay (1991) points out that, "The teaching may have to go the child's way to the teacher's goals" (p. 286). Reading Recovery teachers find this statement encouraging and exciting. Bennetta reports this story:

> **"Don't tell me, I KNOW it!" The first time I heard one of my Reading Recovery students excitedly shout this comment (which was not until the spring of my training year), I realized I was beginning to make the transfer from being a teacher who controlled what and how a student "learned," to the, "guide on the side," able to empower students to take ownership for their learning. Getting to this place in my teaching career was not easy. In fact, it took 25 years. For many years I tried to control children's learning by making instructional decisions based on what I thought children should know, not on what they knew or didn't know. I was not skilled enough to discover students' understanding of concepts in order to know how to teach them. Reading Recovery training taught me how to "follow the child," to figure out his confusions as well as what he knows. I learned it is critical to structure learning experiences so children can use as a scaffold what they already know to access new knowledge.**

**We learned to be efficient as well as effective—to keep a lively pace and make the most of that 30 minutes of time.** Two British inspectors (Office for Standards in Education, 1993) who conducted an intensive investigation of Reading Recovery in New Zealand had this to say about the Reading Recovery lesson: "The Reading Recovery lesson is a highly organized, intensive, and it must be stressed, enjoyable occasion. Moreover, it is not confined to reading alone—writing and a good deal of speaking and listening also feature strongly. . . . A brisk and lively pace was also an abiding characteristic of the Reading Recovery lessons seen" (p. 5 and 177).

We can confirm those observations. Bennetta says,

> ***Lessons are just 30 minutes long with the average student remaining in the program for 14 to 20 weeks. There is a reason. It forces teachers to work efficiently, making careful observations of a child's work and meaningful instructional decisions "on the run" during each lesson. There is no wasted time. The teacher looks at the child's strengths and gaps, deciding what the most valuable teaching point should be in that lesson for that particular child. The teacher selects a teaching point that has applications in several situations and builds on something the child already knows. The tricky part is to guide the child to make discoveries for himself, enabling him to make the new learning in the lesson his own. Once a teacher knows how to orchestrate all of this, Reading Recovery lessons are efficient, enjoyable and effective!***

**We learned the reciprocal value of writing and reading.** Ann says,

> **The power of the reciprocal process of reading and writing have played a major role in the reading achievement of my**

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**students. They can see how taking words apart "on the run" and "hearing sounds in words" help to understand how words work. They know that the idea behind reading is to understand what the author is trying to say, as well as what they are trying to say as writers themselves. A student who is stronger in hearing sounds in words and can write parts of words can use this as a basis for reading. Similarly, a student who can see parts of words, knows how words work, and can take words apart in reading, can utilize these strengths as a foundation for writing and hearing sounds in words.**

**Like other scientists, we developed skill in keeping and analyzing records of our students' behaviors.** Reading Recovery teachers keep records of their observations. We begin with the systematically applied range of observational instruments that help us discover what a student knows at entry to the program (see Clay, 1993a), but that is only the beginning. Every day, we take anecdotal notes of our observations as well as running records of text reading behavior. The running record is a very useful tool; it helps us select books at an appropriate level for each child. We find running records to be an efficient way of recording significant reading behavior—substitutions, omissions, self-corrections, and so on. Analysis of the child's error behavior provides evidence of underlying processes. From the patterns we observe, we make hypotheses that guide our teaching.

It is true that the record-keeping takes self discipline. It can be overwhelming, but, as Mary Jane says,

**I can't think of one piece that I would eliminate. The running records provide me with an instant look at what the child already has under control as a reader. I am better able to make decisions about where that child needs to go next. The records guide me in choosing the new book that will capitalize on the student's control. Norm-referenced tests never yielded the type of information I get from a running record. I now have a document clearly illustrating how the child processes text. The weekly and daily vocabulary charts provide the necessary link between the reading and writing processes.**

**Our colleagues contributed to our learning in deep and significant ways.** Ann says,

**Being part of a profound training experience--focused on the strategic teaching of reading--with the companionships of equally committed teachers who are learning as much as possible about the reading process, created a sense of unity among the members of our class. We were willing to share and collaborate, sharing both the disappointments and successes of our students.**

During her training year, Judy turned to her colleagues each week to weigh ideas collectively. "We were all in the same boat, puzzled yet eager to resolve our confusions."

She notes this:

**That, "We learn from the company we keep" was never truer for me than in this context of collegial support. I came to know more because my peers knew more. We listened, observed, asked questions, and investigated new behavior. These 'teacher talks' enhanced our weekly training sessions beyond measure and became part of our meetings that I anticipated most. The professional respect we held for each other was obvious. I am grateful for a teacher leader who set that tone and encouraged us to find the answers to our questions through thoughtful study and practice.**

Bennetta says,

**Reading Recovery training has been the most challenging and effective educational program of my career. It caused me to examine my professional beliefs and practices. The weekly meetings provided support as I learned 'on the job.' Reading Recovery training classes provided time for professional observations, peer coaching, discussion of research, journal reflection, and more.**

**Reading Recovery teacher leaders offered special help, support, and challenge for us as we examined our teaching.** As Reading Recovery teachers, we support children's learning, helping them to do more with our assistance than they could do alone (Vygotsky, 1978). We help them stretch the boundaries of their learning. Put simply, we help them engage in meaningful reading and writing. We do the hard parts of the task, allowing them to do everything they can with ease and control. Our children feel successful all the time, but our support does not make them dependent. Rather, we strive for children's independence.

In our own professional learning experiences, we felt, also, both supported and stretched. Maryellen states,

**I've also come to realize and appreciate a parallel between my training and the reading instruction that I now provide my children--supportive, building on strengths, modeling, praise, etc. The teacher leader does indeed have a delicate role, helping people to change philosophically, and in very specific ways, and yet in a manner that is encouraging and supportive. I was never made to feel that I had been teaching reading the wrong way all my life. My teaching, beliefs, and past efforts were validated and this support extended to the rest of the group."**

Ann illustrates the teacher leader's role with this story:

**Upon my request, the teacher leader came to visit my tutoring sessions with Theotis. I needed feedback on my teaching and to talk with her about his progress. I welcomed her visits as an opportunity for professional dialogue and collaboration around what would help Theotis to make accelerated progress. This visit really helped me in my teaching, and Theotis graduated from the program a month later. As Reading Recovery teachers, we think that "together is better." The teacher leader and I analyzed Theotis' records and realized that he had become overly attentive to visual detail and needed to develop a more balanced use of strategies. I worked towards this goal in my teaching.**

Judy says that when her teacher leader came to observe lessons, they talked first about the child. The teacher leader asked where Judy wanted the observation to focus. Judy says,

**These visits were essential to my progress. Each observation afforded me the opportunity to focus in depth on one aspect of my teaching. As a result, my book introductions improved, 'making and breaking' (using magnetic letters to learn about how words work) became clearer, my students began to read with better phasing and fluency, and my self concept as a teacher of reading grew.**

In the first year, the teacher leader of Ann's group taught them to believe in themselves and to be open to analysis and critique of their teaching decisions. "Overall, this year has given us the encouragement that the students will become successful readers, allowing us as teachers the privilege of sharing on that journey."

Mary Jane observes,

**We are not threatened if someone asks**

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**why we did something this way or that. I look at it as an opportunity to take on new learning so that I am better able to provide powerful examples which enable my students to take the next steps in their own learning. Cambourne (1988) talks about accepting approximations, and that theory is ever present in the support Reading Recovery teachers get from their peers and the teacher leader. What makes Reading Recovery so powerful is that teacher training and sharing are an integral part of the learning process. Without the component of collegial sharing, I would feel disconnected from the process of learning how to observe young readers and writers.**

**We are experienced Reading Recovery teachers now, but we continue to learn more every year.** Bennetta says, "After the training year, practicing Reading Recovery teachers continue to meet three hours each month. This professional support is invaluable to continued learning." Mary Jane credits the teacher leader with having provided, and continuing to provide, the support and encouragement that helps her to grow professionally and improve upon the daily decision-making she does for each student. She illustrates the tentativeness with which even experienced Reading Recovery teachers approach their work: "Just when I think I've got the whole process down pat, I encounter a new student with new challenges."

Ann states,

**Our training class will continue to grow together and share on a regular basis now, thanks to our involvement in Reading Recovery. Teachers too often feel alone and isolated. I think that school districts would be well served to utilize the Reading Recovery training format [that provides for on-going teacher development]. Together, we are more powerful as teachers and able to help a greater number of students.**

**I came to class wanting to learn how to specifically and strategically teach and to learn to plan for daily interactions with the students in order to make a difference in their lives as readers. I left the class wanting to know more, yet feeling exhilarated with the confidence that the year in training, with coaching from both the teacher leader and my peers, had given me. I await next year, a year with new chances to help children learn to read with confidence, excitement, and most importantly, independence.**

**Reading Recovery is hard work, but we have been rewarded by seeing our children's rapid progress.** Of all this effort—the rigorous and demanding training, the intensive everyday work, and the joyous interactions surrounding literacy events—the bottom-line goal is children becoming good readers and writers. *The successful impact of our teaching is very rewarding to us. Maryellen says, "After three years, I see children who would have spent years in a remedial situation reading confidently and fluently and with obvious enjoyment."*

*Bennetta tells this story:*

***Last fall, I happened to be in the second grade classroom of one of my former Reading Recovery students. This student achieved the highest reading level of all my Reading Recovery students the previous year but never truly saw himself as a reader. On that September day, the 23rd to be exact, Ricky got out of his seat, came over, put his hand on my arm, and whispered into my ear, "Mrs. McLaughlin, I can read!" Now that's powerful: a child who knows that he knows! That confidence allowed Ricky to continue to tackle new learning challenges and become a successful reader, a goal we have for all students. A month later, on October 25, this same child came to see me after school and reported, "Did you know I can read chapter books now?" The spring testing of former Reading Recovery students confirmed that Ricky continues to read on grade level.***

*Most of all, we have learned the potential of what we can do as teachers and we realize that "... literacy activities can become self-managed, self-monitored, self-corrected and self-extending for most children, even those who initially find transitions into literacy hard and confusing" (Clay, 1991, p. 345). Our work has demonstrated to us that children do not have to fail and our systems do not have to fail children. Our role is to provide the supportive interactions that will help these young children realize their potential as readers, as students, and as citizens.*

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